DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 196 FL 016 504

AUTHOR Lovik, Thomas A.
TITLE The Great Leap Forward: Stepping Cautiously into the Proficiency-Based Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (20th, Dallas, TX, November 21-23, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; College Second Language Programs; Comparative Analysis; *Competency Based Education; Conventional Instruction; *Educational Trends; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Language Proficiency; *Second Language Instruction; *Teaching Assistants; Teaching Methods; Teaching Models; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Michigan State University

ABSTRACT

As with any other development in foreign language education, it is critical that the elements of proficiency teaching be transferred to practitioners so that past mistakes, such as those made with the audiolingual method, are not repeated. Proficiency teaching must be carefully analyzed and critically presented to the next generation of teachers. This is one of the great responsibilities of university programs in selecting proficiency-oriented instruction and training teaching assistants (TAs). The resistance of colleagues and administrators to changing from the traditional method of foreign language teaching to a proficiency-based approach can be a major obstacle, but TAs can be instrumental in changing program directions. One university has developed a TA training program consisting of an orientation to the approach and a methods course emphasizing proficiency but urging the new TAs to compare methods. Four special problems of proficiency-oriented teaching include a lack of role models, lack of appropriate materials, increased need for teacher language proficiency, and departure from the traditional teacher-centered classroom. However, despite these problems, proficiency as an organizing principle can provide clear direction and cohesion in a foreign language education program, improve articulation between schools and colleges, and enable programs to generate interest in languages. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED279196

The Great Leap Forward:

Stepping Cautiously into the Proficiency-Based Classroom

by Thomas A. Lovik

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in Dallas, Texas, November 1986.

FL 016 504

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

T. Lovik

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Thomas A. Lovik
ACTFL Nov 21-23 1985
Dallas

The Great Leap Forward:

Stepping Cautiously into the Proficiency-Based Classroom

I. Introductory Remarks

This paper is organized into five parts. Following the introductory remarks in Part I, there is an examination of traditional teaching methods in Part II. Part III looks at the proficiency-oriented classroom. Part IV addresses the need for proficiency-based programs at the university level, and Part V concludes with some remarks on easing into proficiency teaching.

Those of us attending this conference are well aware of the fact that the proficiency movement represents THE foreign language issue of the 80's. Teachers from grade schools through universities are revising their curricula to meet the challenge of proficiency-oriented teaching.

For some FL teachers, proficiency represents a completely new way to teach FLs. For others, some who have been around much longer than I, proficiency teaching is in part just a label for a method of teaching that they have long ascribed to. For them proficiency teaching is the ONLY way to teach a foreign language. These FL teachers have long stressed the need to produce speakers of the foreign language and not simply analysts. Incidentally, I use speakers to refer to anybody who demonstrates competence in the FL not only when speaking, but also when reading, writing and listening.

As with any other development in foreign language education, it is critical that the elements of proficiency teaching be properly

transferred to the practitioners in the field, i.e. the FL teachers. Hopefully, we will not be forced to learn only by our mistakes. Failure to properly educate new FL teachers about proficiency teaching could result in the same mistakes of the past being made again.

The AL movement, e.g., made great promises and seemed to be the answer not too many years ago. However, few ardent champions of ALM remain today in spite of the fact that according to a 1980 study of university FL programs in the U.S. by Benseler and Schulz (p. 3) "most college FL programs apparently utilize a modififed AL approach with emphasis on the development of all four language skills." The great legacy and challenge left by the AL method are the elaborate language labs, most of them outdated and many of them under-utilized. One of the challenges for us lies in adapting them for proficiency teaching. Another lies in drawing on what we have learned from past mistakes.

The AL method, in spite of its shortcomings, offered some other important new innovations, which are still with us today.

1. Many criticize the ALM because students were forced to speak without full attention to meaning. However, in the AL method students did begin to speak the foreign language and hear it in contexts where they might actually be able to use it.

2. Teachers did not need to be able to analyze the grammar. In fact, they were not supposed to teach grammar at all. The emphasis was clearly on speaking and using the language and not on analyzing it. In 1966 William Moulton (p. 262) wrote, "But language analysis (learning <u>about</u> the language) is not the same

as learning to use the language."

3. Provision was originally made for some conversational work. Krashen and Terrell (p. 61) noted in 1983 in the original version of ALM, the army's Defense Language Institute included a conversational session with a native speaker, in addition to dialogue-drill sessions.

As we all know, the AL method did not fulfill everybody's expectations. Part of the reason for this, I believe, may have been due to the inadequate preparation of teachers for the method by teacher trainers. ALM was sold to teachers as a scientific method and therefore it had to be correct. For their part teachers may have been guilty of adopting the new method with blind faith, which resulted in a band wagon effect. These two factors - scientific justification and uncritical adoption - probably compounded the disillusion that eventually led to the ultimate rejection of the method. However, out of frustration with ALM, came increased interest in L2 acquisition research as well as the appropriateness of a variety of teaching methods.

Those of us concerned with the success of proficiency teaching must be careful that it too does not go the way of the ALM. When adopting proficiency-oriented instruction, we should continue to be critical of the claims made. Because proficiency teaching is so important to all of us and the future of FL programs, it must be carefully analyzed and critically presented to the next generation of FL teachers. This, I believe, is one of the great responsibilities that university FL programs bear when selecting

proficiency-oriented instruction and when training our TA's.

One of the great hurdles encountered at the university level in moving toward proficiency-oriented teaching is selling the notion of teaching for proficiency to our colleagues and administrators. Here, perhaps moreso than in secondary schools, there still exists a distinct grammar bias. Many university professors have reservations about communicative teaching for proficiency, prefering instead a grammatical syllabus. Aside from the fact that proficiency-oriented teaching requires class management skills not always needed at the university level, many simply feel that a grammar syllabus serves their program's needs better. Thus the ability to analyze the syntax and grammar of the FL takes precedence over actual mastery of the language.

There are several reasons for this attitude. First of all, many at the university level feel that speaking the FL is not necessary if reading the literature is the goal of your program. Many professors and students at the university feel that given this goal, grammar, especially German grammar, is the most helpful organizing principle, especially from the beginning of instruction. However, even a well-organized grammatical syllabus does not usually produce satisfying results, either for the professors or the students. Secondly, many feel that learning to speak or use the language can only really be acquired by the student outside the classroom and ideally in the target environment. Therefore trying to achieve speaking proficiency in a university program is fruitless. While there may be some truth to this, this flies in the face of student surveys which state

that "oral proficiency is the skill most sought after by students" (Muyskens, p. 187). However, designing a FL program around student desires is considered by some as selling out to mediocracy. That our students put up with some of these prescribed notions (still) surprises me. The declining enrollments, however, of past years are clear indicators that they are not willing to put up with program goals that are out of step with their personal desires and the needs of our country.

Given this situation in FL instruction at the university level, I would like to discuss some of the problems encountered in a transition from a traditional method of teaching FL's to a proficiency-based approach. I will be focusing on the training of graduate teaching assistants at the university level only, but I believe some of the issues raised are pertinent for other educational contexts as well, i.e. wherever new FL teachers are being trained. To illustrate some of the problems one confronts in instituting proficiency-oriented instruction, I would like to look first at a more traditional program and then contrast this with proficiency-oriented instruction.

II. Background/Scenario

Classes

The situation at my university, where I coordinate the Elementary German Program, is not unlike that at many universities, I suspect. We are currently offering 14 sections of first-year German: 10 sections of first quarter German, three sections of second quarter German and one section of third quarter German.

Many of our students take German to fulfill a foreign language requirement for their particluar program. The University or the College of Arts & Letters, however, do not have either an entrance or a graduation FL requirement.

Staff

Our teaching staff is a heterogeneous, overworked group of experienced and inexperienced teachers. We have three new graduate teaching assistants: two Germans and one American. The two Germans both speak fluent English and the American speaks very good German. One of those new TA's is teaching two sections of German 101 and the others are each teaching one section. In addition to the three inexperienced T.A.'s, we have two temporary instructors, teaching four sections between them. We also have three tenured faculty members teaching five sections between them. I also teach one section myself. My job is coordinating the teacher input in these 14 sections in order to unify the student output.

Scheduling

This quarter all teaching assignments for the introductory language classes were announced the day before classes began, after all enrollment information had been tabulated.

Textbook

The textbook used in the first year program was inherited from last year's program.[1] Published in 1984, it could easily be classified as a grammar-based text. Each chapter begins with two-three short dialogues, followed by pronunciation exercises

[1] Dollenmayer, Hansen, Hiller, Neue Horizonte Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1984.

and some grammar drills from the dialogues. These are intended as oral work after the material in the chapter has been mastered.

The bulk of the text consists of grammar explanation with accompanying drills. Although each chapter has a theme reflected in the title, e.g. "Land und Leute" "Die DDR" "Einkaufen und Essen," grammar is clearly intended as the focus of the chapter and the organizing principle. Any elimination of selected items from the grammar makes using other portions of the text problematic, at best. Oftentimes, the rationale for selection of the grammar defies any linguistic, pedagogical, or common sense explanation. None of this grammatical material is recycled systematically throughout the book, so that the majority of the students never really master it. To it's credit, the book does include helpful conversation activities.

TA's who are asked to teach from a grammar-oriented textbook must be taught at least four skills, some of which will also serve them, perhaps indirectly, in the proficiency-oriented classroom:

1) Explanation of content (pronunciation, grammar, culture). Having to explain something to somebody makes you learn it yourself, and this knowledge is even valuable to teachers in a proficiency-oriented classroom.

2) Classroom management (pacing, activities, dynamics). Even in the proficiency-oriented classroom, there are time limitations and teachers must be skilled at managing time.

3) Evaluation procedures (testing, monitoring). Proper evaluation is extremely important with any teaching method, but especially critical in proficiency-oriented

teaching.

4) Roles (teacher, student).

It is essential that there be a comfortable teacher-student working relationship.

III. The Proficiency-Oriented Classroom and TA Training

The proficiency-oriented classroom by necessity looks quite different from the traditional classroom. Omaggio discusses five hypotheses which outline the proficiency-oriented classroom.

1. "Opportunities must be provided for students to practice using the language in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target coulture." (p. 44) Students must also be given the chance to express their own meanings in active communicative interaction with other students. The teacher must encourage creative language practice along with authentic instructional materials whenever possible.

2. "Opportunities should be provided for students to practice carrying out a range of functions (task universals) likely to be necessary in dealing with others in the target culture." (p. 48)

3. Linguistic accuracy must be a concern for the beginning instruction.

4. The method must respond to the affective needs and cognitive needs of the students.

5. The method must provide cultural understanding.

<u>New TA's</u>

The task of transforming a group of inexperienced, intimidated graduate teaching assistants into a cohesive, confident,

successful group of FL teachers certainly presents challenges and difficulties.

One of the greatest difficulties is preparing them for the classroom in the shortest time possible. In spite of all the advances in FL education, L2 acquisition and descriptive linguistic studies, we still expect our new TA's to teach their first course ever without any extensive practical or theoretical training. Some FL departments provide a TA training workshop prior to assuming teaching responsibilities. This is at best a few short days, perhaps even a week.

In spite of the inherent difficulties, TA training and supervision also has its bright side. For the most part, new TA's represent a tabula rasa. Initially they readily adopt the instructional methods suggested. Being students themselves, most TA's seem to intuitively recognize valid techniques of FL teaching but are not always sure how to become proficient with the method and the techniques. Oftentimes what they lack is the theoretical foundation to back up the method.

Orientation

In order to prepare our new TA's minimally for a partial proficiency-oriented approach, we provide them two days of orientation. (We are considering expanding this two five days in the Fall of 1987.) The emphasis here is both on practical tools, e.g. first day hints and techniques, as well as some theoretical underpinnings for the approach.

From the very beginning new TA's are encouraged to consider how adults become proficienct in a second language as suggested by Omaggio (in Higgs, p. 46). We discuss differences in L2 acquisition between West Germany and the U.S. Almost universally, German TA's agree that the methods used in German schools for teaching English, French, or Latin are ineffective and do not prepare them well for the "real" world.

Proficiency is also presented in the orientation as the organizing principle as suggested by Higgs (1985). TA's are introduced to the ACTFL guidelines and the distinction between context, function, and accuracy as principles for proficiency-oriented teaching. Specific proficiency goals based on the California Foreign Language Competency Project and the U. of Minn. Guidelines for German are presented and discussed.

From the start of their careers, new GTA's are encouraged to think in terms of proficiency in all areas of language usage. To assist them, a checklist (Muyskens, p. 189) is provided and discussed. They are also continually encouraged to ask themselves what it is one does with the language (pragmatics), since this is after all our purpose for having language.

Finally Krashen's Monitor Model is also outlined and the implications this has for teaching according to Krashen and Terrell (1983) is also presented and discussed.

Methods Course

The orientation is continued in a methods course for the new TA's. One goal of the methods course is to develop a critical

view of the various teaching methods, so that as Donahue writes TAs can be led "to formulate a personal philosophy of language teaching (p. 143). There is an inherent conflict here, though. Whereas TA's are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about what works and what does not, they are also required to adopt a method prescribed by the TA supervisor before they have been allowed to synthesize their own methodology for teaching. This conflict usually reaches a head in the discussions of chapter tests.

As Muyskens suggests "The theme of proficiency can subsequently be used as an organizing principle of the methods course." (p. 184) It is conducted entirely in German and the TA's must carry out various tasks, e.g. identifying communicative goals for each chapter, and using, demonstrating, and reporting on various acquisition activities. At the same time I try to develop their linguistic sensitivity to recognize how language functions in various contexts. This knowledge helps them in organizing their own activities for language usage beyond that which is presented in the book.

Four Special Problems of Proficiency-Oriented Teaching

Role Models

In addition to simply preparing new TA's for the FL classroom, teaching in a proficiency-oriented program presents special challenges and problems for TA training. It is safe to assume that most new TA's have not learned their FL's in a proficiency-oriented classroom. Their ideas about FL teaching have usually

been determined by their own FL learning experience, which was most likely grammar-oriented. Thus their role model for teaching, if they have one (at all) other than their language coordinator, is probably someone who used a traditional grammar-oriented approach. The use of video, master classes, and peer observations have all proven successfull in overcoming this obstacle.

Activities

The activities-oriented classroom can provide quite an obstacle to any teacher making a transition to proficiency teaching, experienced or inexperienced. The old standby activities from a grammar-based approach, e.g., various substitution and transformation drills, occasional personalized questions, and frequent translation exercises often written on the board, are no longer appropriate by themselves any more for students to acquire the FL. In the proficiency-oriented classroom TA's are encouraged to go beyond mere achievement. Pardee Lowe, Jr. writes (1985: 237):

> "Proficiency, in contrast, consists of achievement (grammar, content, "functions," and "notions," ILR task-universals) plus functional evidence of internalized strategies for creativity. Task-universals (ILR functions) stress "what you want to do"; context/content "where and with what you want to do it"; accuracy "how well you want to do it."

The difficulty in employing an activities-oriented classroom is, first of all, finding a suitable textbook or enough appropriate communicative activities. Providing new TA's with day-to-day classroom activities is no problem, providing one has usable materials. However, Pardee Lowe, Jr. (1985:235) notes that there has been some delay in developing proficiency-based courses (materials) in the U.S. Furthermore, the successful application of many acquisition activites requires an ability to judge what will work and what will not work in any given class and this seems to come only after much experience. Over time the new TA's will begin to accumulate their own repertoire of useful classroom activities.

The scope of this problem surrounding useful classroom activities is reflected in the range of workshops with titles such as "Techniques That Work." Clearly, the demand for such workshops indicates that even experienced teachers still feel the need for more innovative ideas.

Use of the Foreign Language

In a grammar-oriented classroom with an emphasis on grammar explanations, the instructor often conducts the entire class in the native language instead of the target language. Many feel that the FL class does not need to be taught in the target language, and there are those who would argue it should not be, lest the students fail to comprehend the intricacies of the grammatical explanation. Intricate grammatical explanations simply do not lend themselves to explanation in the foreign language, especially if the FL is one with very few cognates with

English, e.g., Japanese, Arabic, or Chinese.

By contrast, the proficiency-oriented classroom is conducted primarily in the target language. This presupposes a proficiency by the teacher that was unneccesary with traditional grammar methods. Since many TA's at the university are non-native speakers, this can be very demanding. Thus one task of preparing TA's who are not native speakers of the language for the proficiency-oriented classroom is to provide them with sufficient opportunities to improve their command of the FL. Muyskens (p. 183) suggests employing proficiency tests when selecting teachers. Why not TA's too? Study abroad opportunities and summer institutes are other ways that these TAs can improve their proficiency in the FL. This is an absolute must if TA's are to succeed in a proficiency-oriented classroom.

Departure from the Teacher-Centered Classroom

It is also characteristic of the grammar-oriented classroom that it tends to be fairly teacher-centered. Teachers follow the exercises in the book and students follow the directions of the teacher. Students are rarely allowed to express their own meanings at all times.

In the proficiency-oriented classroom, however, TAs must be trained to relinquish center stage and allow the students to express their own individual meanings. This, however, requires more creativity of teachers and students. TA's have to receive some guidance in their creative pursuits, lest they make inefficient use of class time, or worse yet, mislead their

students. On the other hand, when students are creative they commit errors. Instead of lying in wait for students to commit an error, the P-O classroom teacher, must adopt a different attitude toward errors. TA's have to be trained to expect and possibly even anticipate errors as a neccesary prerequesite for language acquisition. These must then be treated constructively, and not in a punitive fashion. Furthermore, TA's must be trained to distinguish between global communicative errors and local errors of form. Failure to do this will only discourage their students from experimenting with the language.

In short, teachers in the P-O classroom must relinquish some of the things they cherish most: 1) control of the class, 2) constant attention to linguistic accuracy, and perhaps the element most threatening of all 3) the center stage. To fill this void, first-time TA's have to be trained to be facilitators and managers rather than dominators in a FL classroom. This requires more knowledge about devising and evaluating useful activities for the classroom. Various classroom structures, e.g., pair and group work and task assignments, must be treated systematically. In this case the how of teaching is as important as the what. In addition, P-O teachers must be flexible, creative, sensitive to the language being taught and willing to experiment.

IV. Why Do University Programs Need to be Proficiency Based?

1. Proficiency as an organizing principle can provide clear direction and cohesion in a FL program. I suspect that few FL

teachers at the university level would object to the notion that one goal of FL instruction should be proficiency in the FL. However, the term proficiency means different things to different people. In a traditional grammar-oriented curriculum, proficiency means grammar mastery. In a proficiency-oriented classroom grammatical accuracy is balanced against the ability to express various linguistic functions in a wider variety of contents and contexts. In this way student desires are addressed, cultural and linguistic sensitivity is achieved, and presumably better speakers of the FL are produced.

2. Proficiency-oriented FL instruction can improve the articulation between schools and universities and colleges. Ultimately, this should strengthen university programs and make the school teacher's job easier too.

3. Proficiency-oriented FL instruction may also enable FL programs to generate interest in FL's and to accommodate all the students who may be confronted with a FL requirement in the future. If our methods cannot produce success among students - the movers and shakers of the future - then we will find ourselves once again failing at the task of educating ourselves for the 21st century.

V. Easing into Proficiency Teaching

How can one ease into proficiency-oriented teaching without alienating one's established colleagues and intimidating and frustrating inexperienced TA's? First of all, such a transition will take some time, from 2-5 years perhaps. Initially, one can

set the tone for the program, and the elements of proficiency teaching can be emphasized regardless of the method being used. For example, class time can be used for acquisition activities; new activities and authentic materials can be developed and tested; emphasis on function can be encouraged alongside accuracy and content; more realistic expectations of what students want, need and will be able to do can be highlighted.

In each case, new TA's can play a critical role. Specifically, they can be required to employ one new game or activity each week. Later on they can be required to produce their own activities. Initially these new activities will function to reinforce the material taught. Such activities would then be available for inclusion in a proficiency-oriented classroom.

TA's will also need to readjust their expectations about the teacher's role in the classroom. They can be encouraged to adopt more student-student work and to de-emphasize the teacher-centered classroom.

TA's can be encouraged to adapt and employ authentic language materials, whether these are written, audio, or video materials. Because of their age and interests, TA's usually have a more realistic assessment of student interests and can find materials of high interest to students.

New TA's must also be trained to expect certain things. Error analysis can assist the TAs in developing realistic expectations of what can be expceted of students at each step of their

language acquisition.

Finally when the time comes to make the transition to proficiency-oriented teaching, it will not be as bold or foreign to either the new TA's or the experienced teachers in the department. Hopefully one will not need to take this last step as cautiously as I have implied, nor will it be a great leap anymore. The transition should be an exciting one. Hopefully students will appreciate our work more and they will be motivated to pursue their FL studies.

ACTFL
Dallas, Texas
November 20-23, 1986

The Great Leap Forward:
Stepping Cautiously into the Proficiency-Based Classroom

Thomas A. Lovik
Michigan State University

REFERENCES

Benseler, David and Renate Schulz. "Methodological Trends in College Foreign Language Instruction." MLJ 64 (1980): 88-89.

California Foreign Language Competency Project Working Draft Statement of Competencies in Foreign Language for French, German, and Spanish expected of Etering Freshmen. A Project of the Foreign Language Liaison Committees of the Articulation Council of California. March 4, 1985.

Donahue, Frank E. "A Texas Model for TA Training." Die Unterrichtspraxis 13, No.2 (1980): 141-149.

Higgs, Theodore V. "Language Teaching and the Quest for the Holy Grail," 1-9 in Theodore V. Higgs, ed., Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle. Lincolnwood, IL.: National Textbook Co., 1985.

Krashen, Stephen D., and Tracy D. Terrell. The Natural Approach. Hayward, CA.: The Alemany Press, 1983.

Lowe, Jr., Pardee. "Proficiency-Based Curriculum Design: Principles Derived from Government Experience." Die Unterrichtspraxis 18, No. 2 (1985): 233-245.

Moulton, William G. "Advice for the Language Learner." Modern Language Journal 50 (1966): 261-263.

Muyskens, Judith A. "Preservice and Inservice Teacher Training: Focus on Proficiency," 179-200 in Theodore V. Higgs, ed., Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle. Lincolnwood, IL.: National Textbook, 1985.

Omaggio, Alice C. Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction. Boston,MA.: Heinle & Heinle, 1986.